

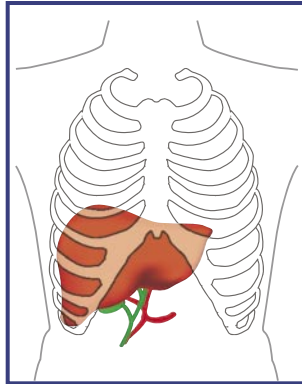


What is my liver?

Your liver is one of the largest and most important organs in your body.

Where is my liver?

Your liver is behind the lower right part of your ribs. Your ribs help protect your liver.



What does my liver do?

Your liver is very important to your health. It does all of these jobs:

- Stores vitamins, sugars, fats, and other nutrients from the food that you eat;
- Makes chemicals that your body needs to stay healthy;
- Breaks down harmful things in your body, such as alcohol and other poisonous (or *toxic*) chemicals;
- Removes waste products from your blood;
- Makes sure that your body has just the right amount of other chemicals that it needs.

What are some of the diseases that can affect my liver?

Many diseases can affect your liver. If you have one of these diseases, your liver may not work as well as it should. These are some of the most common diseases that can affect your liver:

◆ **Viral hepatitis**

Hepatitis is a medical term that means swelling (or *inflammation*) of the liver. Viruses that attack the liver cause some of the most common forms of hepatitis. Usually your doctor can use a simple blood test to see if you have been exposed to one of these viruses. Three of the most common viruses that attack the liver are the following:

~ **Hepatitis A virus (HAV)** is usually spread through dirty food and water. If you get hepatitis A infection, you may feel like you have the flu and notice a yellowish color (called *jaundice*) in your skin or in the whites of your eyes. Most people get better after hepatitis A without any problems.

~ **Hepatitis B virus (HBV)** is spread through blood, semen, and vaginal fluid. You can get hepatitis B infection if you have sex with a person who has it. You can also get it if you share needles or works to inject drugs. Like hepatitis A, hepatitis B can make you feel sick for a short time. After that, most people get better. A small number (2 to 6 percent) of people who get hepatitis B infection have problems for a much longer time. In some cases, these problems can cause permanent liver damage. Following your doctor's advice is the best way to make sure that you get better.

~ **Hepatitis C virus (HCV)** is mainly spread through the blood. If you share needles or works to inject drugs, you have a high chance of getting hepatitis C infection. People who had a blood transfusion before 1992 might find out that they are infected as well. Unlike the other hepatitis viruses, the virus that causes hepatitis C may not make you feel very sick. In fact, you can be infected and not even know it. Hepatitis C is a serious illness. Most people who get hepatitis C never get rid of the virus completely. Over time, it can cause permanent liver problems, including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

◆ **Cirrhosis**

Cirrhosis, (pronounced "sir-o-sis"), is a medical term that means "scarring of the liver." When you have cirrhosis, large parts of your liver are

damaged. Because it has been damaged, your liver may not work as well as it should. People often get cirrhosis of the liver by drinking too much alcohol. Hepatitis, especially hepatitis C, can also cause cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can be very dangerous if it is not treated properly. It is important to follow your doctor's advice if you have cirrhosis.

◆ Liver cancer

Like many other body organs, your liver can get cancer. Liver cancer is a disease in which some of the cells in your liver reproduce faster than they should. These cells form growths called tumors. If you have hepatitis B or hepatitis C, you have a higher chance of getting liver cancer. Liver cancer can be deadly. If you find out that you have liver cancer, you need to get treated as soon as possible.

What are liver function tests (also called a "liver panel")?

Your doctor can see how well your liver is working by looking at certain things in your blood. When your liver is working well, the levels of these things are low. When your liver is not working as well as it should, they can get much higher. These things include liver enzymes (or *chemicals that your liver uses to do its work*) and bilirubin (pronounced "billy-roo-bin"). Albumin (pronounced "al-byoo-men") is a protein made by the liver. The albumin level is below normal when the liver is damaged.

If your blood test results are not normal, your doctor may think you have liver disease. Usually, he or she will have to do other tests to make sure.

How can I protect my liver from disease?

Your liver is one of the most important organs in your body, so it's a good idea to keep it healthy. These are some of the things you can do to protect your liver:

- Don't have unsafe sex. (Always use condoms.)
- Don't inject drugs, such as heroin or cocaine.
- Don't share any personal items that might have blood on them, such as razors or toothbrushes.
- Don't drink alcohol. Alcohol is a poison to the liver and can make liver diseases, such as hepatitis, much worse.
- Get shots (or *vaccinations*) against hepatitis A and hepatitis B. A simple series of shots can protect most people from getting infected with the viruses that cause hepatitis A and B. There is no vaccine yet against the virus that causes hepatitis C.
- Make sure that the water you drink and the food you eat are clean. Most cases of hepatitis A infection come from dirty food or water, especially in restaurants and cafeterias.
- If you take any medicines, make sure your doctor knows about them. Be sure to tell your doctor about any over-the-counter medicines, supplements, and natural or herbal remedies that you use. Certain medicines taken at the same time can cause damage to your liver, even if you can buy them without a prescription.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

This material is not copyrighted and may be reproduced.

Public Health Strategic Health Care Group (13B)
Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420
IB 10-149 Revised June 2004